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## The Influence of Social Network on Youth Political Expression

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### Abstract

With the development of new media technology, social network has increasingly become a platform of the youth for emotional communication and ideological expression. It has gradually evolved into the main channel for political expressions of the youth and has changed the discourse system of online political discussions. Although social media has improved the youth's ability to participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs, it has also led to some problems. Therefore, it is important to let social network have positive effects on the youth's political expression, as well as the avoiding or amelioration of its negative effects. Then, the dissatisfaction from the youth can be eliminated, and social instability factors might be reduced.

**Key words:** Social network; The youth; Political expression; Social influence

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### INTRODUCTION

As is pointed out by Marshall McLuhan when summarizing the role of media in the development of human society, "media is the basic driving force for social development; the emergence of each new medium creates the way human beings perceive and understand the world and changes the relationship between people." (McLuhan, 2005) Social network has

been the most influential factor for young people's daily life since the Internet entered the era of WEB 2.0. With the popularity of smart phones and the extensive use of mobile applications such as microblogs and the WeChat, social network has increasingly become a platform of the youth for emotional communication and ideological expression. It has gradually evolved into the main channel for political expressions of the youth and has changed the discourse system of online political discussions. Thanks to social media, youth become able to participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs. However, some negative phenomena have also emerged. Therefore, it is important to let social network have positive effects on the youth's political expression, as well as the avoiding or amelioration of its negative effects. Then, the dissatisfaction from the youth can be eliminated, and social instability factors might be reduced.

### 1. THE CONNOTATION DEFINITION OF SOCIAL NETWORK

At present, the use of social network's concepts in the academic circle is chaotic, and it is not strictly distinguished from the terms such as social media, new media and we media. Therefore, before the discussion, I would like to make a brief review of these concepts, so as to conclude the exact connotation of social network.

Social media is one of the most confusing concepts with social network. Both are products of the era when the Internet developed to focus on social relations, but the former pays more attention to the attributes of media, which is corresponding to the traditional paper media and emphasizes the dissemination mode and effect of its information. However, social network focuses on the interpersonal relationship. Its main function is to build relationships and emphasize interactivity, while the transmission of information is a by-product.

The concept of new media comes from P. Goldmark, an American scholar. It refers to the media such as radio, television and film which is different from the traditional printing media and based on the technology of radio wave and image transmission. It should be pointed out clearly that new media is a relative concept, which constantly updates its connotation with the change of times and the invention of new technologies. For example, radio is new media compared with text, and Internet is new media compared with television. (Jiang & Xu, 2006)

We Media is the concept originated from the study "We Media" by Shein Bowman and Chirs Willis. It refers to a new way that the public provides and shares its discoveries, experiences and news as digital technology continues to evolve and global knowledge systems become increasingly interconnected. (Bowman & Willis, 2003) In terms of concept expression, it is more consistent with Goffman's "self-presentation in daily life".

The concept of Social network originated from the Six Degrees of Separation theory of Stanley Milgram, a famous American scholar. The full name of social network Social Networking Services. In terms of the use of concepts inside China and abroad, some social networking platforms are often emphasized, such as Facebook in foreign countries, "Renren" and "Douban" in China.

Comprehensive above, the concept of social network used in this paper is relatively broad, which is a real-time interactive platform based on WEB2.0 technology, allowing users to upload, share and spread information. It covers the special social network, social media and the we-media platform, pays attention to the establishment of the social networks, and is the virtual network dominated by strong relationship.

## 2. POSITIVE INFLUENCES OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON YOUTH POLITICAL EXPRESSION

Since the new century, the Internet has entered the era of WEB2.0, and social network has gradually entered young people's daily life. This has greatly changed their way of life, behavior habits and ideas. The change of the political communication mode brought by the development of the new technology has had a positive impact on the expression of youth's political consciousness.

### 2.1 Social Networks Has Expanded the Room for Youth Political Expression

In a sense, cyberspace is a virtual version of the public domain, but not a simple, ineffective virtual existence. The channels for young people to participate in politics in real space are extremely limited. In addition to the practice of voting and standing for election, only the expression of public events or private interests remain. Political participation in social networks has weakened the hierarchical concept of traditional bureaucracy and

has obvious characteristics of decentralization. As long as any netizen is permitted by law, he or she can have direct contact with governments at all levels or express his or her views on certain policies through the Internet, totally free from the restrictions of status, wealth or other practical conditions. Social network breaks through the limitation of traditional geographical space and becomes a flowing space. Moreover, because of its characteristics of openness, low cost, anti-control, concealment and clustering, this space can carry out political expression more freely. More importantly, social networks are based on virtual representations of human relationships, which emphasizes the interaction and effectiveness of participation. In traditional political participation, the process of citizens receiving government information is passive and one-way. As a contrast, the political participation in the social network environment realizes the two-way information exchange and even multi-directional communication interaction. This larger scale of effective expression is more likely to attract young people to participate in it, and even the emergence of online public carnival.

### 2.2 Social Network Has Changed the Discourse System of Youth Political Expression

According to Kevin Kelly, "how much information people will have in the future will determine how much power they will have." (Chen & Yu, 2012) Similarly, the control of the discourse, to some extent, determines the content and direction of information flow, and ultimately affects the change of power structure. In the traditional channels of political participation, rules of procedure, language and expression are often emphasized to show the ritual and solemnity of political power. However, due to the existence of multiple subjects in the network world, the discourse system in the traditional field is challenged. The grassroots continue to deconstruct the traditional elite culture. "Mainstream discourse" is gradually replaced by "marginal discourse". The traditional power structure also shows the trend of diversification and dispersion. In order to cope with the online supervision of the government, local departments and institutions, netizens have gradually formed their own expression mechanism in a large number of practices: "continuous hot topics, unexpected words, twists and turns of the stories" (Li, 2013) They use the Internet's vast population to create the most popular forms of colloquial expression. Internet buzzwords all reflect the wisdom of netizens, but also highlight the dull official discourse. Internet buzzwords include "good and powerful", "very erotic, very violent" and "too simple, sometimes naive", as well as "get soy sauce", "push ups" and "hide and seek". This kind of tongue-in-tongue expression greatly entertained the public and generated a greater range of communication and effect through social networks. With the introduction of traditional mass media, Internet language has gradually become a part of youth's daily discourse.

### **2.3 Social Networks Have Increased the Ability of Young People to Express Themselves Politically**

The open and interactive features of social networks enable young people to participate in the production and dissemination of information. It breaks through the information difference brought by the stratification in the traditional social pattern, breaks through the monopoly of the traditional elite on political discourse and participation behavior, and provides more practical possibilities for grassroots youth to participate in politics. First, social networks make it possible for young people to wake up with a sense of citizenship. As an imported product, China's civic consciousness has been advocated by a large number of advanced intellectuals, but it still cannot take root well. However, with the popularity of social media, especially WeChat, as a daily communication application, it has provided a possibility for the awakening of Chinese citizenship.

Secondly, due to the novelty and professionalism of their political expressions, some young people gradually grow into Key Opinion leaders (KOL). On the one hand, as KOLs, they must constantly learn and improve their professional ability to maintain their self-image and ensure the continuous attention of fans. On the other hand, KOLs should constantly pay attention to the development of current affairs and actively participate in the practice of public affairs, which is bound to improve its ability of political expression. Finally, for ordinary young people, political expression can also be realized through rational network onlookers in public events. They can also improve their critical thinking ability and political literacy by extensively learning political information, practicing online political role play, and actively participating in the exchange of views on political events.

## **3. NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL NETWORK ON YOUTH POLITICAL EXPRESSION**

Social network has the characteristics of openness, low cost, anti-control, concealment and clustering. On the one hand, these characteristics provide a good platform for young people's political expression, deconstruct the influence of traditional discourse system, and promote their awareness of civic consciousness and improvement of political participation ability. But at the same time, social network also brings some negative effects due to the high overlap between circles and real people, the real-time transmission and the stratification of groups.

### **3.1 The Strong Relationship of Social Network Weakens the Initiative of Youth Political Expression**

Social network is a medium with strong relationship as the main and weak relationship as the auxiliary. Focusing

on interpersonal interaction is its core. Because of the limitation of reality, young people's social network is basically the extension of strong relationship in the real world. According to the theory given by Professor Mark Granovetter from Stanford University, the so-called strong relationship is basically the most frequent contact with relatives, classmates, friends and colleagues. It is a very stable but limited communication range. People are familiar, full of trust and friendly. (Chen & Yu, 2012) This kind of difference order pattern in the real world reflects on the result of cyberspace, which tends to weaken the initiative of young people's political expression. The first reason is that the elders have experienced some political experience and have a strong sense of exclusion from political life. They often admonish them out of their care for their children. The second reason is that the traditional social etiquette and hierarchy will dispel the principle of seeking fairness and mutual benefit in interpersonal communication among young people. A large number of advertisements implanted, required forwarding and praised will cause some young people Disgust and rejection of social networks. Third, because the traditional politically correct idea and interest tangle also exist in social network, the intertwined relationship of circle group will lead to the occurrence of interpersonal friction. Therefore, based on the "cross-border fear" mentality, some young people are cautious everywhere. They often adopt the indifferent strategy to the political expression of public life and become the "silent majority". Or, young people may hide their true ideas out of "preference disguise".

### **3.2 The Communication Characteristics of Social Network Affect the Correctness of Youth Political Expression**

The spread of social network has the characteristics of openness, concealment and real-time. These characteristics greatly attract and facilitate the political expression of young people, but objectively they will also cause some deviation and misleading. First of all, the open communication mode of social network has led to a variety of information and Thoughts on the network. To some extent, this situation will impact young people to establish a scientific and correct belief system and value standards, and affect their political judgment and discrimination. It will also weaken the concept of the traditional nation-state of youth, and impact the original ideology, political system and authority. Secondly, the concealment of social network will enlarge the speculative psychology of youth in political expression.

In order to attract other people's attention and take an extremely expressed position, some people will deliberately fabricate and distort the facts, spread harmful information to others, and even make statements that are not conducive to social and political stability. Some people will use social networks to gain other people's privacy,

attack other people's morality, cheat other people's virtual property, and conduct improper or illegal transactions. Among them, they play the roles of "Internet explorer", "keyboard man", even "water army", "thug" and "mob". Finally, the real-time characteristics of communication speed up the dissemination of information and enhance the pleasure of interaction. But it is also easy to bring confusion and cognitive loss, and even lead to the rapid spread of Internet rumors.

### **3.3 The Main Body Difference in Social Network Leads to the Conflict of Youth Political Expression**

Looking up at existing researches, we can find that the mainstream scholars all emphasize that the network society is a decentralized, de hierarchical structure of equal rights and a public domain of virtual space. In fact, because of the involvement of social networks, the influence differences caused by the level differences under strong relationships are everywhere in the network society. Young people's political consciousness and life cognition in the real world are transferred to the Internet world. Whether it is the pursuit of entertainment stars or the trust of traditional elite media, they are all extended to the Internet space. This has resulted in the group differentiation of the digital world, and intensified the expansion of the "digital gap" and the differences in political expression.

Among the netizens, the low-income and low education group is the main body, and the elite group is the minority. No matter in the "self-presentation of daily life", or in the recognition of the authority of the government, the expression of group interests or public affairs, these two groups will produce friction. Even, there will be group polarization. Especially with the emergence of stratum solidification, the so-called "indignant youth" consciousness is gradually formed among the young intellectuals at the bottom who are mainly unemployed in rural areas and the new generation of migrant workers, which strongly rebounds the current mainstream views. This dissatisfaction, spread through social networks, to a certain extent, contributes to the antagonism between network grumpiness and consciousness, and has a negative impact on the stability and development of society. (Yu, 2010)

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## **4. WAYS TO REGULATE YOUTH POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN SOCIAL NETWORKS**

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With the development of social networks, the political expression of young people is bound to be more diversified and complicated. In order to improve the current situation of youth political expression on social network, guide youth rational expression and orderly

participation, it is necessary to cooperate with multiple levels and departments. From the macro perspective, it is necessary to further improve laws and regulations and improve the governance system. From the middle point of view, we should establish a political expression mechanism and a professional guidance team. At the micro level, we should strengthen the cultivation of young people's media literacy and political quality.

### **4.1 Improve Internet Laws and Regulations, and Improve Network Governance System**

To guide young people's political expression to develop in an objective and rational direction, we must build a good network public opinion environment. To create a harmonious and clear network ecology, we must improve laws and regulations, improve the network governance system, and enhance the self-purification ability of the network world. Generally speaking, the existing network legislation lacks the overall planning. There are blind spots in the network laws and regulations. The existing laws are not easy to operate. There are many regulations and explanations for the economic level, and few laws and regulations for the political level, especially for the network communication. Therefore, we must seriously study the problems after the emergence of social networks, and improve the existing legal system from the content and form, rather than a single judicial interpretation of Internet rumors and other issues.

At present, China's Internet governance system is mainly dominated by the central government, with the participation of various departments, local authorities, operating agencies and Internet users. From the central level, the Ministry of industry and information technology, the central network information office, the Ministry of public security, the State Administration of press, publication, radio and television, the Ministry of culture, the Ministry of publicity, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce and other departments have defined their responsibilities and are in charge of dealing with issues in their respective fields. However, with the increasing number and complexity of network governance issues, it is necessary to further formulate plans from the strategic level, set up specialized network political, economic, cultural and security governance institutions, and perform their respective duties, so as to improve the efficiency of collaborative governance of all departments. In addition, we should also actively strengthen the interaction between the central and local governments, between the government and the operating agencies, and between the public, refer to the excellent experience of foreign countries, cultivate the core values of the network society, and participate in many ways. In this way, we can enhance the ability of network self purification and jointly create an open, equal, harmonious and legal network environment.



## 4.2 Constructing the Mechanism of Political Expression and Building the Team for Online Public Sentiment

The rise of youth's political expression in social networks is mainly due to the poor mechanism of political participation and expression. Therefore, it is necessary to further reduce the participation cost of the existing expression mechanism according to the overall characteristics and development trend of young people, optimize the attractiveness of Party and League organizations and social teams, increase the proportion of young people participating in various conferences, and incorporate the political expression of young people into the organization. In addition, we should establish a multi-dimensional expression mechanism of interest demands and build a variety of political expression platforms in combination with regional, professional and property differences. We should innovate the working mechanism of Ideological and political education, lead the youth of different levels to rationally output their real ideas, so as to reduce the occurrence of informal and irrational expression.

At the same time, we should actively establish network public opinion work centers at all levels and industries, build a team of capable network commentators, and strengthen the training of network public opinion professionals. First of all, the establishment of network public opinion centers at all levels and industries provides an organizational platform for public opinion work. On the one hand, it can regularly carry out network public opinion prediction, analyze the development direction of public opinion, follow up and reasonably guide the development trend of public opinion in real time. On the other hand, the team is conducive to the research, communication and training activities of staff. Secondly, we should give full play to the leading role of network commentators in young people's political expression. For this reason, we must select some people with strong political literacy, high theoretical level, skilled network technology and strong ability of writing expression to join the team. They should be able to clarify the facts in time, carry out ideological and political education, guide public opinion and resolve the crisis. Finally, we should strengthen the training of professional talents, set up information security, network security, public opinion management and other related majors, and reserve professional high-level talents for the development of China's network.

## 4.3 Strengthen the Media Literacy Education of Youth and Improve the Level of Political Expression

The American scholar, Manuel Castells, defined the network society as: "a historical trend, in which the main social functions and social processes are all around the

network. The development of information technology has gradually disintegrated the system and structure that have been established in modern society. The network constitutes a new social form. The internal logic of the network dominates production, life, power, culture and other important social life." (Castells, 2006) But the behavior subject in the network society is still the extension of the real social person. Therefore, the political expression of young people in social networks will inevitably involve the ability endowment, ethical restraint and legal discipline in real life. In order to promote the rationality and effectiveness of youth political expression, it is necessary to strengthen youth's media literacy and improve their political expression level.

The so-called media literacy refers to people's ability to choose, question, understand, evaluate, create and produce information in different media, as well as their ability to respond to speculation. (Duan & Du, 2010) To strengthen the media literacy education of young people should be the dual cultivation of theoretical knowledge and practical ability. Through the study of media literacy, young people can understand the way of media communication, keep in mind the media ethics and legal norms, improve the ability to analyze and identify media information, and absorb and digest media information rationally. In addition, they can give full play to their ability to create and produce information in daily life, influence others through a large number of practices and communication, and form a virtuous circle. In addition, young people should also take the initiative to use social network resources, strengthen their political literacy learning, understand the party's and national policies, development plans and. In addition, they should actively participate in real political activities, cultivate political participation skills, and ultimately improve the effectiveness of political expression.

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## CONSTRUCTION

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Social network is increasingly becoming the main channel of youth political expression. We must give full play to the positive role of social network in youth political expression. Meanwhile, we should face up to its indifference, deviation and conflict in political expression. In addition, we are supposed to seize the opportunity, in order to continuously improve the online governance system. A scientific and reasonable expression mechanism needs establishing to improve the political literacy of young people, so as to realize the rationalization, order and normalization of youth political expression. In this way, we can provide continuous and sound support for the construction of social democracy with Chinese characteristics.

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